

**THE
MARY
JANE
PAINTINGS**

**GRAHAM GUSSIN
HANDEL STREET PROJECTS
14 FLORENCE STREET, LONDON N1
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TEXT BY JONATHAN P. WATTS**

THIS IS YÖÜR CÄPTÄIN SPEÄKING YÖÜR ØÄPTÄIN IS DEÄÐ

Two years before the British prog rock band Hawkwind launched their second album in 1971, 'In Search of Space', the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, a German-Jewish refugee in America, published *An Essay in Liberation*. Identifying a 'new sensibility' that characterised the revolutionary impulse of the post-68ers, he noted how 'Today's rebels want to see, hear, feel, new things in a new way'. Of 'the trip' – an hallucinatory drug experience – he writes that it:

involves the dissolution of the ego shaped by the established society – an artificial and short-lived duration. But the artificial and 'private' liberation anticipates, in a distorted manner, an exigency of the social liberation: the revolution must be at the same time a revolution in perception which will accompany the material and intellectual reconstruction of society, creating the new aesthetic movement. Awareness of the need for such a revolution in perception, for a new sensorium, is perhaps the kernel of truth in the psychedelic search.¹

Liberation, then, is also a matter of undoing the normative, orderly regime of everyday perception. Not a derangement of the senses, but a transformation of the senses. Between the 'artificial and "private"' individual and the social collective, however, there can be no guarantee of the quality and directness of transformation that might occur – only the anticipation of distorted exigency. Queasy needs. A society yet to come. Among these queasy needs are the moral, ethical and theological concerns at the heart of psychotropic drug use expressed throughout modernity, from Thomas de Quincey to William Burroughs, Charles Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin.

Surely an evocation of Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* (1860), Marcuse's pointed use of the word 'artificial' recalls that the writer of modern life's greatest concern was that hashish's effects were, precisely, artificial. As a member of the *Club des hachichins*, a circle of artists and writers, among them Honoré de Balzac, Eugène Delacroix and Gérard de Nerval, who met in private quarters to use and discuss the effects of the drug, Baudelaire carefully observed his psychoactive experiences. 'A new subtlety or acuity' may 'manifest... in all the senses' – he describes its manifold positive affects at length – but '[h]ashish, like other solitary delights, makes the individual useless to mankind, and also makes society unnecessary to the individual'. While hashish heightens perception and magnifies the senses, for Baudelaire ultimately it offered nothing new, only an exaggeration of the actual.

Perhaps this was because, as the cultural critic Sadie Plant argues in *Writing on Drugs* (1999), his Catholic faith gave him a notion of real paradise with which

hashish just couldn't compete.² The afterlife's riches in paradise could only be earned by a lifetime of religious seeking. Hashish, however, circumvented the effort and time it took to reap such rewards, representing an attempt to 'blot out the work of time'. 'They were short-cuts to a paradise,' Plant writes, 'that were not a paradise at all.'³

Graham Gussin, *Retreat*, 2016



In 1971, among the ruins of the traditional 'ideological state apparatuses' – church, schools, family, media – Hawkwind's 'In Search of Space' promised more than just a musical experience: it was an extra-audio-visual psychedelic toolkit for imagining a para-possible universe. Aside from being a band, of course, Hawkwind was also a space ship, a space ship equipped for a trip like no other before. Inside the record sleeve, emblazoned with the watchful eye of providence on a rippling liquid backdrop, was 'The Hawkwind Logbook'. Melding science fiction, magical-mystical literature, cosmology and paranoiac aphorism, it chronicles a trip through folded, non-linear time and space. If music was an engine, sound was the fuel, and THC, the psychoactive substance in hashish, a supercharged tincture.⁴ On Day 1 of the Logbook a permutational script reads:

One trip is space
trip is one space
is trip space one
space trip is one
one space is trip...

On Day 5 a ragged space craft docks off of Andromeda at 1445hrs, 12 June 2211BC. On Day 6, sometime between 1530hrs on 9 April 1911 and 2359hrs on 31 December 3304 on the Sea of Galilee, rising water sloshes at the foundations of futuristic ruins in the Amazonian jungle. By day 7, the final day, introduced by an infographic of a man hitting a bong (an exploding star the proxy for the high), is a text overlaid on an image above the horizon, outside of terrestrial time:

This is the last entry in the Hawkwind log. It was not dated. I have seen the Tao and travelled the middle way. I have heard the word and spoken the word. I have lived in the flesh and I have eaten the flesh. I have been blinded by the light.

And now I believe in the supreme and mystic darkness of nothing, in the deepest reaches of the immaculate void, in infinite nothing, in the unremitting realms of nothing, in the abundance of nothing, in the incomprehensible infinity of untold nothing, in absolute nothing.

On the record's gatefold sleeve, accompanying a photograph of the blurred, thrusting naked body of Hawkwind member Stacia, is a command, ornamented in diacritics:

TECHNICIÄNS ÖF SPÄCE SHIP EÄRTH THIS IS YÖÜR CÄPTÄIN
SPEÄKING YÖÜR ØÄPTÄIN IS DEÄD



Futuristic ruins in the
Hawkwind Logbook

As the record player's needle loops on the groove at the end of 42:17 of 'In Search of Space' its duration might appear a distorted exigency compared, at least, to Baudelaire's lifetime of seeking. Yet, as anyone who's smoked knows duration can become plastic, malleable, a blot, nothing even. And we're left asking more questions than may be answered. Does the music require a psychoactive substance to have agency? If this is an imperative then does it point at the aesthetic's lack of efficacy? Who is being liberated and from what? What version of paradise is being promised?

Over a duration of twelve years Graham Gussin has sporadically produced – micro-dosed – canvases and drawings that make up 'The Mary Jane Paintings'. The clue to their material content is in the title itself: 'Mary Jane', the all-American girl next door as euphemism for Marijuana, was a private cipher for outsiders that enlisted a community in its very utterance. Today it's a cliché, no longer a secret language, instead a linguistic artefact of the counterculture (new drug monikers, fast moving vernaculars that speak to accelerated culture, are

a fascinating and frequently humorous balance between use, community and understanding). Like the Mary Jane moniker, Gussin's paintings are more or less discernible images with stylistic allusions to art historical types – vibrating colour fields, Suprematist constructions, ornamental meshes and Rorschachian mimetic blots – but with a material substrate that refuses to surrender its secrets so easily.

Or, if I write that this material substrate is hashish, which Gussin, like some latter-day alchemist, admixes with linseed oil, sicatiff and cobalt, it will be overdetermined – a conceptual sleight on the relations between content, form and value. A readymade urinal is valued as a priceless work of art. An unmade bed is auctioned for £2.5 million. Gussin paid £100 for an ounce in '09 but why (aside from the street value of hash) is the value of the painting different today? Spinning out the para-criminal, legalistic and pharmacological terminology reveals the common language of exchange in contemporary art: the makers and the dealers, content and possession.⁵ It would be the perfect analogy if people were actually addicted and habituated to contemporary art and not *Blue Planet*, smart phones and social media.

As Sadie Plant notes, the common thread between all drugs, whether ancient or new, grown in the wild or synthesised in laboratories, fatal in large doses or without toxicity, liable to fluctuating prices, is that they all shift perceptions, affect moods, change behaviour, and alter states of mind. You will not get high by looking at 'The Mary Jane Paintings' – they do not function as exigent agents of social liberation – but because of their content they contain a material potential which, in terms of use, means they remain perpetually open. As artworks can we separate their exigency as agents of social liberation from their material content? Certainly you don't need to be high to view 'The Mary Jane Paintings'.

Given the allusiveness and referentiality to art historical styles and cultural objects could it be that Gussin is inviting us to reflect on the power of art itself to shift perceptions, affect moods, change behaviour, and alter states of mind? How do philosophical questions of aesthetic transformation manifest in contemporary art making and viewing? Besides orientating our interpretation, these references invite novel speculative re-readings and correspondences between historical artefacts.

This is Your Captain Speaking (2018), a central work at Handel Street Projects, is a striated tone poem in delicate rivulets of hash residue. They hang in cartoonish fronds, flickering ambiguously between being a sheet of wood, celluloid film shuttling through the projector gate, or a curtain. Hawkwind's command, truncated, lends itself to the title. Is the captain a cipher for the ego 'shaped,' as Marcuse wrote, 'by the established society'? If the captain is dead then you must

learn to fly the spaceship.⁶

At the theatre it's the curtain that occludes the stage from the audience; in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) it's the veil that conceals the decrepit body of the authoritarian voice.



Graham Gussin, *This is Your Captain Speaking*, 2018

For Gussin, it is also an allusion to 'curtainology', a neologism Walter Benjamin invents in his posthumously-published blueprint for a book on psychoactive drug experiences, titled *On Hashish* (1927–34/2006). As his friend Jean Selz recalls of the time they used opium in Ibiza:

The view from the open window, through the white muslin curtain, was the repeated focus of his musings... The city and the curtain soon ceased to be separate things. And if the city had become fabric, that fabric had become the stuff of a garment. It was our garment, but was moving ever farther away from us. We then observed that the opium was divesting us of the country in which we were living. Benjamin added the humorous remark that we were engaging in 'curtainology'.⁷

The body dissolves and time is suspended, not unlike the phenomenological language of encounter that characterises Mark Rothko's colour field paintings in Rothko Chapel. A trip to a site of pilgrimage for attention, contemplation, reflection and presence. Gussin's version of this, humorous because it literally contains psychoactive substances, is the large monochrome *The Astral Plane* (2018). A painting about painting, what if, Gussin wants us to consider, the encounter with abstraction was in fact one of distraction? Not presence but

absence, a kind of deflection instead of reflection? Is that a trip?

Gussin, likewise, reminds us in works such as *Construction in Time and Space (I)* (2018) that Suprematist constructions in space and time and subsequent experiments in 'the new vision' of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy were revolutionary attempts at undoing that normative, orderly regime of everyday perception. These constructions brimmed with energy and movement. El Lissitzky describes his *Proun* series of abstractions in autonomous, visionary terms, as though he were flying the Hawkwind:

I think that freedom can be attained only after our ideas about the organization of solids have been completely smashed... I have ripped through the blue lampshade of the constraints of colour. I have come out into the white. Follow me, comrade aviators. Swim into the abyss.⁸

Gussin's small, near-abstract painting, *Entrance to a Lane* (2018), shares the melancholy introversion of its model, Graham Sutherland's *Entrance to a Lane* (1939).

Graham Gussin, *Entrance to a Lane*, 2018



Sutherland has written of his desire to capture a 'personage', a 'presence', a 'genius loci', a 'form', a 'monster' that all lay just beneath the world of appearance. As Malcolm Yorke has written of Sutherland and the neo-romantics more generally, at their most successful these pictures push back our modern cynicism for a moment:

could there be a flicker of truth in those animalistic old beliefs that a spirit could inhabit a tree; that a standing stone could be holy; that snaking roots could be malign? The glimpses of numen we are offered are not reassuring: they only confirm our fears that the twentieth century is a cruel place to be marooned in.⁹

The cruelty has not ceased. Those first on board the spaceship as planet Earth is destroyed will be those responsible for its destruction. What will their paradise look like? Hieronymous Bosch needn't have been mashed to produce some of the most intensely psychological and irrational paintings in existence. Samuel Palmer's visionary landscapes came from the same Christian apocalyptic imagination – a fear of not making it into paradise, rather than any drug-enabled experience.

For a period of around seven years Walter Benjamin ate hash, smoked opium and, in the name of medical research, allowed himself to be injected with mescaline and opioids. He took these drugs, which he considered a poison, for the sake of the knowledge he gained from their use.¹⁰ Writing on Surrealism in 1929 he notes its founders' driving passionate revolt against Catholicism. It's a cardinal sin, he writes, that Surrealists' association with religious ecstasy and ecstasies of drugs are most well known to the public. For Benjamin the true creative overcoming of religious illumination – think of Baudelaire's Catholic paradise – 'certainly does not lie in narcotics'. It is, rather, in what he calls 'a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson'. In brackets he continues:

'(But a dangerous one; and the religious lesson is stricter.)'¹¹

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay in Liberation*, Beacon Press books, 1969/2000, p.37.

² Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs*, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1999, p. 37.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sun Ra's spaceship in John Coney's film *Space is the Place* (1974) is powered by music: music's energy is the fuel that enables a community of African Americans to establish their own colony in outer space. In 1968, Richard Buckminster Fuller's survivalist handbook for the Age of Aquarius, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1968), conceived of the planet as a technological sphere that might be engineered into a new equilibrium.

⁵ The series began when Gussin's hope to paint a wall of the Lisson gallery using an ounce of cocaine mixed into white paint was blocked by the Home Office. Over the years a lengthy process of legal consultation has emerged between potential exhibitors of 'The Mary Jane Paintings' and lawyers. The extent to which Gussin may be liable for prosecution for producing (if not selling) the paintings is referred to as 'retrievability' and is linked to the notion of intention to supply illegal substances. That this is an ongoing series of paintings – an accumulation over a period of twelve years – would be favourable in Gussin's defence. Ideally, each painting would also be accompanied by a forensic substance report to be presented to the court in the case of trial.

⁶ Writing in the *London Review of Books* in January 2017 Mike Jay described the atrocities committed by soldiers in Syria high on the synthetic drug 'Captagon'. When the massacre at the Bataclan occurred in November 2015 experts assumed the 'superhuman' killers were, too, high on Captagon but the forensic reports revealed no trace – a frightening testament, Jay writes, to strength of religious-ideological conviction. The brand name Captagon combines 'captain' and 'pentagon', words 'chosen for their association with potency and their transcendence of language barriers'.

⁷ Jean Selz, 'An Experiment by Walter Benjamin' in Walter Benjamin *On Hashish*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, pp.151–2.

⁸ El Lissitzky cited in T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, Yale University Press, 2001, p.234.

⁹ Malcolm Yorke, *The Spirit of Place: Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and their Times*, Constable & Company, 1988, p.138.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin *On Hashish*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, p. viii.

¹¹ Ibid. pp.132–3.